

The Caged Bird Sings of Freedom F9



Henry Sugimoto
Freedom Day Came, 1945
Oil on canvas
Gift of Madeleine Sugimoto and Naomi Tagawa, Japanese
American National Museum (92.97.73)

BACKGROUND

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

- Maya Angelou

On December 18, 1944, the Supreme Court, in the case of *ex parte Endo*, ruled that the War Relocation Authority had no authority to detain an American citizen. Then in September 1945, the Western Defense Command issued Public Proclamation No. 24 which revoked all individual exclusion orders and all further military restrictions against persons of Japanese descent.

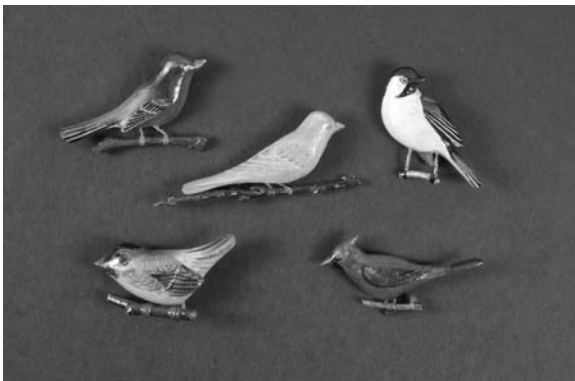
FREEDOM DAY CAME

With this painting, Henry Sugimoto celebrates the lifting of the exclusion order and the possibility of returning home to California. The man, who dominates the composition, rests his chin in his hands, his elbows on a table top. He is surrounded by a map of the United

States with California clearly marked. The man studies a yellow and brown bird which seems reluctant to leave its opened cage. Perhaps it does not yet comprehend its freedom. Perhaps it does not yet know where to fly.

In an effort to fight boredom in the camps, the Japanese Americans had quickly organized art and craft classes for the adults, many of whom had never before worked as artists. The *Issei*, in particular female *Issei*, had spent their adult lives working and providing for their families with little free time for hobbies.

In all ten camps, the inmates carved small birds that were made into pins. For the Japanese Americans, the bird was a symbol of freedom. It was also a familiar part of their world. A large number were farmers who shared a great reverence for nature. Ruth Asawa explains that “nature was the source of our livelihood and the center of our lives.” (Taylor) The Japanese Americans carved birds familiar to them in Arkansas and in California. In his book *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*, Allen Eaton further explains that the inmates used images of birds published in issues of *National Geographic* which they ordered.



Unknown Artists
Carved Birds, ca. 1942-45
Painted wood
Mabel R. Jamison Vogel/
Rosalie Satine Gould Collection

Mary Tsukamoto was incarcerated with her family at Jerome and wrote of her years in the Arkansas camp in a memoir titled *We the People*. Tsukamoto explains that the birds were carved from scrap wood, often the wood of crates used to ship produce into the camps. Because the pins were tiny (about 3" in length), the legs posed a problem. Eaton explains that these resourceful artists trimmed excess screen from around the windows and found more scraps on the ground, left behind by the builders of the camps. They unraveled the wire, twisted it into coils, and formed the legs which were attached to the birds and then to a twig where the bird perched.

ACTIVITY

Share pictures of carved birds from the Vogel/Gould Collection. Explain how the internees made the birds. Next provide pictures of birds that are found in Arkansas and California. Suggestions include the “cousins”: blue jay and stellar jay, eastern bluebirds and western bluebirds, screech owl and burrowing owl, common crow and common raven, red-headed woodpecker and acorn woodpecker. Good images of all these birds can be found on the Internet. [See **Resources** page.]

Sculpt 3" birds from baker’s clay using the recipe created by Ruth Asawa who was incarcerated at Rohwer. (See **Resources**.) Make legs and feet with thin twisted wire, wrap-

ping the feet around small sticks. Bake the birds in a conventional oven and paint them with tempera or acrylic. Glue a pin on the backs. Wear your art.

Fourth Grade Visual Arts Standards: A.1.1, A.1.2, A.1.3, A.1.4, A.1.7, A.1.8, A.1.9; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3, A.2.4, A.2.5, A.2.6, A.2.7, A.2.8; A.3.1, A.3.2, A.3.3, A.3.4, A.3.5, A.3.9.

Fifth Grade Visual Arts Standards: A.1.1, A.1.2, A.1.4, A.1.5, A.1.7, A.1.8, A.1.9, A.1.10; A.2.1, A.2.2, A.2.3, A.2.4, A.2.5, A.2.6, A.2.7; A.3.1, A.3.3, A.3.4, A.3.5, A.3.6, A.3.9.

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INTERVIEWS AND LETTERS

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John Kawasaki, Los Angeles, California, July 2003, interview by STP.

Eddy Kurushima, Los Angeles, California, November 2002 and July 2003, interview by STP.

Bob Mitori, St. Louis, Missouri, June 2003 interview by STP; June and July 2003, February 2004, letters to and from STP.

Madeleine Sumile Sugimoto, Little Rock, Arkansas, November 2003, interview by STP.

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